



## **Shades of Grey**

**Garry Barker**

This symposium and exhibition set out to explore how art and artists respond to issues of ageing: in particular to expectations, perceptions and fears, loss and memory and generational boundaries.

Speakers included Mick Ward and Caroline Starkey from Leeds City Council as well as three artists: myself, Jo Lee and Geoff Broadway.

As well as providing a text for the symposium, I exhibited two sets of work, one responding to my father's death and the other to the death of my mother.

This exhibition was important in that it was the first time I was able to exhibit work that responded to deep personal experiences, in conjunction with the giving of a lecture that was written to specifically relate my art practice to wider human interests, in this case how we as a society deal with death. In particular it opened a door for my own research into how art and life can be usefully linked together and it firmed up my belief in undertaking projects as both a way of making allegorical images and as a way of shaping responses to life events. Thus, confirming my decision to engage more in community events and to allow my art practice to reflect on these experiences.

### **Exhibition**

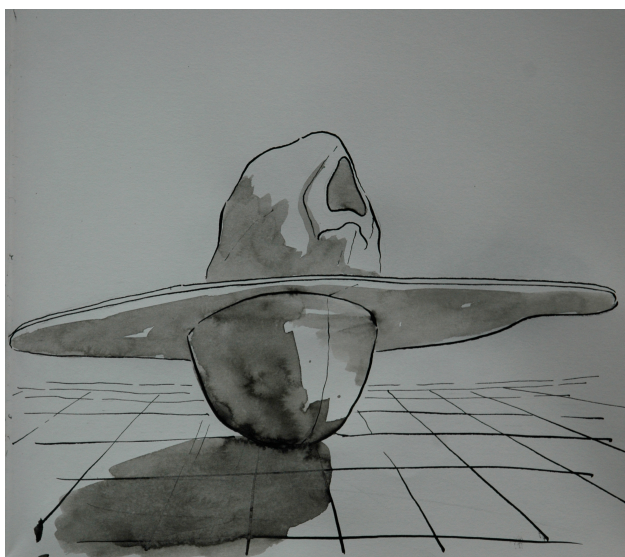
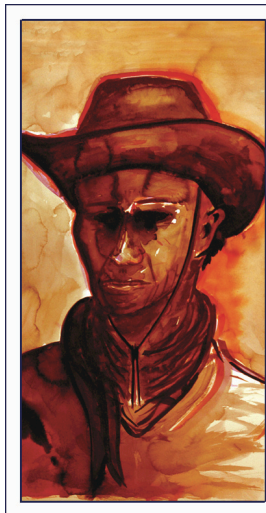
**Shades of Grey**, The Project Space, East Street Arts, Leeds. June 2010.

Shades of Grey

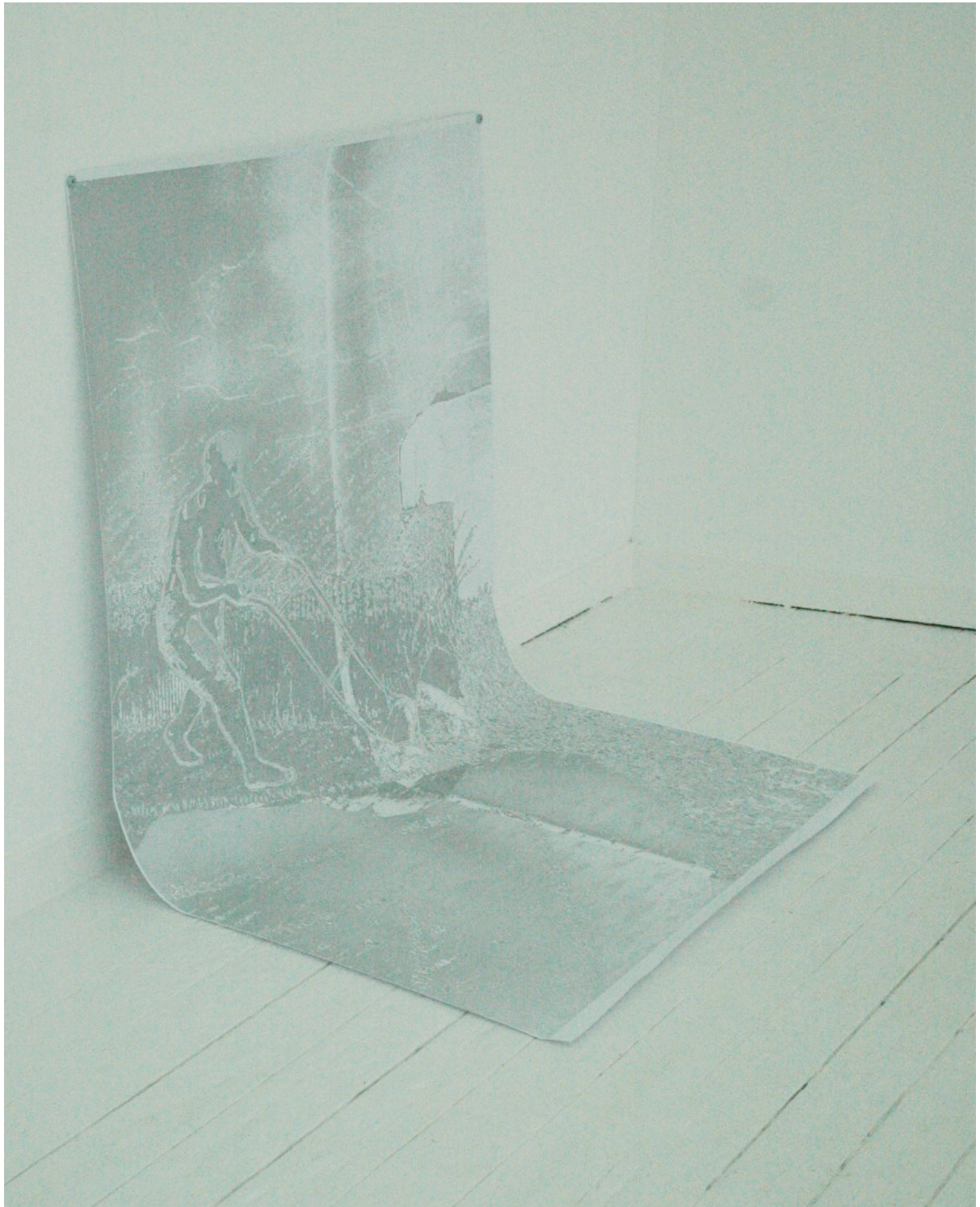
Exhibition and Symposium

East Street Arts Project Space June 2010

John Victor Barker: The Cowboy: 1926 – 1995







Ghost mower

Selected images from 'Father' the Shades of Grey exhibition



Constance Thelma Barker: The Cleaner: 1928 – 1985







Selected images from 'Mother', the Shades of Grey exhibition



## Death, Discontinuity and Defamiliarisation: The Aesthetics of a Post-Modern Death.

“Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably”. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’

As we get older one of the issues we have to come to terms with is an awareness of the fragility of our own memories. What happened to us yesterday is easily forgotten but the important moments of childhood and our adolescence remain fixed and at times the past appears to have a hold on us far stronger than our immediate circumstances. This can for some of us lead to fears of approaching Alzheimer’s disease the most common form of dementia. At its onset you may have memory loss, particularly of recent events. This may not be severe at first but is likely to become progressively worse.

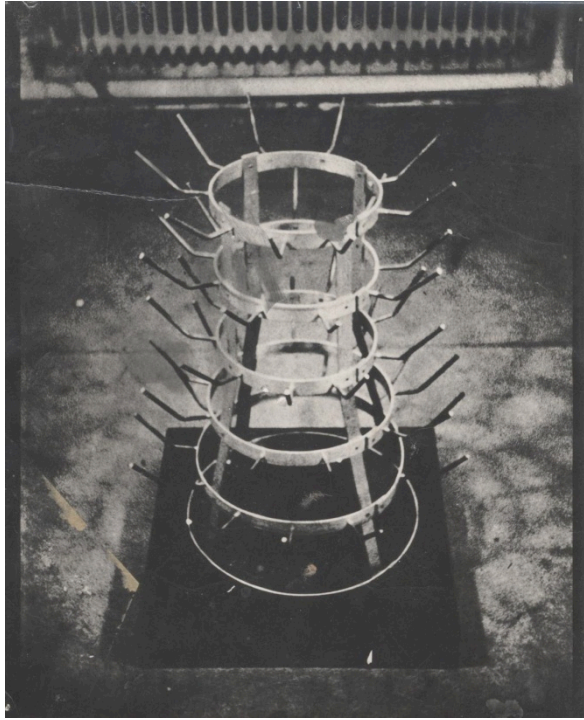
However what can become pathological is only a dark reflection of normality; we all forget where we left the car keys and the details of that meeting we went to yesterday, because what we are experiencing as we get older is familiarisation. We have been there, done that, over and over again, until at some point, we start moving onto automatic pilot.

The failure to retain memories feels particularly painful, because it is our memories that make us what we are, our inner consciousness is a series of connections to events and experiences that only make sense when embedded within an ability to recall. The longer we live more information is stored and more connections are needed for its retrieval. We also find ourselves working to established patterns of behaviour and become comfortable to our growing ‘conservatism’. However as we get older we find the process of familiarisation punctuated by tragic events, often the deaths of those we have known throughout our lives, our parents in particular being people that are so sewn into the fabric of our being that the realisation that we now have them no more creates a hole that seems impossible to fill. They are so familiar that their images have worn thin like the soles of old shoes that have shaped themselves into echoes of our feet.

As an artist and theorist growing older has been a process that has been a challenge. Over the years I have passed through several changes in art’s theoretical positioning. Finding a theoretical stance from which to practice that acknowledges the move from Modernist, to Post-Modern practices and which recognises the fundamental shift away from individual practice as indicated in writings surrounding relational aesthetics and post production practices has been interesting, and for myself is part of a long running dialogue with the possibility of an authentic art-form and of how a mediated response to experience communicates to an audience.

I can easily pick out the two significant events within my own experience that have fundamentally shaped my approach to image making. The first was the birth of my children and the second the death of my parents. These events are ones which every human culture has responded to and are central to most religions. In the West at Christmas we celebrate birth and at Easter we commemorate death.

My daughter was born during the Summer of 1979 and in the following Spring October magazine published Craig Owen’s first instalment of his essay ‘The Allegorical Impulse’. He was referring at the time to the work of artists such as Sherrie Levine and appropriation, an area of work I had been involved with deeply for the previous 10 years.



Garry Barker Hand-made bottle-rack 1972

The image above is typical of the work I had been making and as I was unaware at the time of Levine's work it felt as if I was treading new ground and that I had a handle on contemporary practice.

When my daughter was born, I went home and drew all night. I tried to capture something of the moment, something of an experience that blasted away all the intellectual pretensions of a previous life of aesthetic flim flam. I failed miserably to capture anything that I wanted to, but the experience meant that I had spent a long time trying to remember. It was this that was to become the important issue.

Francis Yates' book 'The Art of Memory' was an important book at the time and my own strong feeling was that what I was trying to do as an artist was to act deliberately in response to uncertainty and to recognise an extra-ordinary dimension to 'ordinary' experience. A birth was ordinary but for the individuals concerned it was extra-ordinary. However over the weeks that followed the events slowly faded from being clear images to being ones that had to be dredged back into consciousness. Yates had recognised this problem and had demonstrated how memory needs images that de-familiarise and a need for structure, if it is to be strengthened.

Now my daughter is in her 30s and is a good artist in her own right. My art practice has changed and become at first glance much more conservative. However it is not without a theoretical underbelly. The choice of watercolour and pen and ink as a medium for practice was resolutely taken because of it being the medium of choice for English amateur painters. It seemed to me I could express my links to a specific tradition and use my awareness of communication theory to shift my conceptual approach into allegory. Owen's text arrived at the right time and reinforced my view that all appropriation could do was signify distance. What he was using as a text I could subvert towards my own ends by using a disjunction of practice to develop an allegory that could perhaps help with the development of a more autobiographical practice. In appropriating an old outmoded form of practice, (pen and ink

appeared to be no different to using found objects at the time) it allowed me freedom to concentrate on the memory image. It was this way of working that hit its first real test when my mother died.

My mother lived in Dudley in the Black Country and I was living and working in Leeds. She had bowel cancer and from diagnosis to her death it took approximately 9 months. On weekends I would travel by coach to Dudley and on the coach back to Leeds I would draw. From these drawings I tried to synthesise the experiences as a way of holding on to the last memories I would have of her. Each time I visited it seemed as if there was less of her and she gradually seemed to fade back into the environment she herself had constructed.

The work on display is a selection of some of these final images, together with a few images of childhood that emerged as part of that process of talking when someone is dying. "Do you remember when..."

My father died a few years later. Our relationship was very different. He had been very much a showman in his youth and I had sat through many of his performances of cowboy songs when I was a child. Like my mother he had surrounded himself with bric-a-brac over the years and had had all his collections of cigarette cards framed and mounted. He died suddenly of a heart attack while cutting the lawn. I took a much longer time to find a way to deal with his death, eventually doing it twice. Initially using images of the Western World and the fact that George Bush was a man of my own generation coupled with the fact that I was trying to come to terms with my own grief over the Labour party taking us to war over Iraq, then finally finding an image in a lawn-mowing man that became a comic version of the grim reaper. The links with water colour painting and the amateur, now being stretched into the world of comics and my first contact with drawings that told stories.

Both these experiences have had direct impacts on my wider art practice. I have accepted them as necessary elements of a practice that is now entrenched in an autobiographic project. They have also been part of the acceptance of getting older. I am now the oldest member of the family, therefore next in line to die and if I don't treasure the memories of now, they will quickly be gone forever. This is where I find myself, on the cusp of retirement and yet aware that lots of work needs to be done if I am to develop allegories for the future. One way of doing this is by mining my past for its ability to reveal an extra-ordinary dimension to 'ordinary' experience the other of course is experiencing the present.

Garry Barker 2010